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23 September 2004

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Russia: Old Believers Church, including description of the customs, the location of congregations, whether the Church has any congregations in Toronto, and the treatment of the church by the public and the authorities
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Old Believers Church customs

The Old Believers separated themselves from the mainstream Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century when in 1652, Patriarch Nikon, head of the Orthodox Church, introduced reforms to bring "Russian Orthodox ritual and doctrine in line with those of the Greek Orthodox Church" (Wikipedia n.d.; see also ITAR-TASS 12 May 2004; CNN 2000). A number of people, called Old Believers, rebelled against these reforms by insisting on keeping the older traditions of the Orthodox Church (Orthodox Christian News Service 12 Nov. 2003; Wigowsky Jan. 1978, 2). The main objections of the Old Believers were to the reforms of the rituals rather than of the teachings of the Church (ibid.). For instance, Old Believers continued to make the sign of the cross with two fingers rather than three as dictated in the reforms of Patriarch Nikon (ibid.; Orthodox Christian News Service 12 Nov. 2003; Religion Revisited 16 Mar. 2003). Other rituals which they insisted on keeping in defiance of the Orthodox Church's new doctrine, included singing "Hallelujah" twice rather than three times (Lithuanian Art Museum 2 Sept. 2004; CNN 2000) and spelling Jesus' name with only one "i" (Isus) rather than two (Iisus) (Orthodox Christian News Service 12 Nov. 2003).

Old Believers use the Julian calendar (Wigowsky Jan. 1978, 10) and celebrate 38 holy days every year (ibid.). Each holy day consists of extensive celebrations and special services, which make the Old Believers spend a significant amount of time in celebrations (ibid.). They also celebrate mass every weekday and Sundays (ibid.). There is a religious ceremony to mark every important event in an individual's life (ibid., 11), and the events of everyday life also reflect religious beliefs: cooking and other household chores are blessed and there are rituals which must be performed upon entering someone's home (ibid., 12). For weddings and funerals, ceremonies last a number of days and are quite elaborate (ibid., 12-15). Traditionally, and even today, one of the key identifiers of Old Believers is their singing (CNN 2000). Choirs of Old Believers such as that in the town of Tarbagatay in Russia, are recording compact discs (CDs) and touring now thanks to money provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Russian Ministry of Culture (RFE/RL 1 Dec. 2003).

Old Believer communities have historically been isolated, as those in Siberia (ibid.; Orthodox Christian News Service 12 Nov. 2003) or in Alaska (Wigowsky Jan. 1978, 9). The communities are tight knit and members of the community look after each other (Religion Revisited n.d.). However, with the opening up of their communities to tourism and to economic activity from Russia and beyond, the lifestyles of the Old Believers are beginning to change; the stress of economic changes under post-Soviet rule has led some Old Believers to commit suicide, for instance, in the community of Tarbagatay, Russia (CNN 2000). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the younger generation is less interested in traditions and rituals and the ways of the Old Believers are threatened (ibid.; Orthodox Christian News Service 12 Nov. 2003). The younger generation of Old Believers living in the United States, for instance, is losing the teachings and traditions of the Old Believers (Religion Revisited n.d.). Changes that have led to the loss of state farms and village-level businesses have created stress in the communities, and as indicated by Galina Chebunina, the head of the Semeiskie Cultural Centre in Tarbagatay, Siberia, "there is not much optimism left" (CNN 2000).

During the last half of the 20th century, "Soviet atheism destroyed much of the culture" of the Old Believers (RFE/RL 1 Dec. 2003). While post-Soviet reforms initially hurt the economy of the Old Believers villages, during the 1990s, some of their communities started to prosper because of tourism (CNN 2000), and also because UNESCO provided funding to the Semeiskie for cultural activities (Old Believers living south of Lake Baikal in Russia) after naming them "one of 19 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001" (ibid.; RFE/RL 1 Dec. 2003). The result is that one of the community's choirs was able to go on tour (ibid.).

Treatment by the Public and the Authorities

Old Believers have been subjected to discrimination to varying degrees during the last three centuries, by members of the Russian Orthodox Church and/or by various tsars (Wigowsky Jan. 1978, 3). However, "[i]n 1971 the Russian Orthodox Church recognized the validity of the old rites and restored the status of the Old Believers within the church" (CNN 2000).

In 1990, the Government of Russia passed the Freedom of Faiths Law which "made 'all denominations and religions... equal under the law,' and guaranteed every citizen's right to 'freedom of conscience'" (Journal of Church and State 1 Oct. 2002). The result was a renewal of various religions, including that of the Old Believers (ibid.). During the 1990s however, the Russian Orthodox Church increasingly put pressure on the government to create a new law, which was passed in 1997 and which "put the brakes on Russia's brief experiment with unlimited religious freedom" (ibid.). Under the 1997 law, registration requirements for "the Federation's less traditional religions" are stricter and the "unique contributions" of the Russian Orthodox Church are clearly stated (ibid.). Although the Russian Orthodox Church is still the dominant religion in Russian society, a number of other religions are able to function, albeit to a limited extent (ibid.). Information on how this new law affects the Old Believers was not found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to ITAR-TASS, in 2004, "the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Old Believers Church have reached an agreement on cooperation" (12 May 2004). The purpose is to "'improve the moral atmosphere and life of society'" (ITAR-TASS 12 May 2004).

No mention of the treatment by the public of individuals affiliated with the Old Believers Church could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Congregations

It is difficult to estimate how many Old Believers exist in 2004 (Orthodox Christian News Service 12 Nov. 2003). While the *Europa World Factbook* states that there were 278 groups registered in Russia in 2001 (2004, 3562), as estimated by the Patriarchate of the mainstream Orthodox Church, there are half a million Old Believers in Russia, and according to Father Romil Khrustalev, spokesman for the Old Believers, there are between 1.5 and four million Old Believers in Russia, Romania, and several former Soviet Republics (AFP 31 Dec. 2003). Sveta Graudt, writing for the Orthodox Christian News Service, reports that the number of Old Believers remaining is unclear, but it is known that there are far fewer than before the 1917 Revolution (12 Nov. 2003).

According to Adherents.com, as of 2001 there are congregations in Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Russia, as well as in Oregon, Alaska and Pennsylvania in the United States (10 Nov. 2001). The 2003 *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* does not include listings for any Old Believer congregations in the Toronto region. In a telephone interview on 22 September 2004, a priest from the Old Believers Church in Oregon, in the United States, stated that there are no established parishes in Toronto, although there are scattered Old Believers all across Canada, including in Toronto, on the East Coast and in Upper Alberta. Neither the Government of Canada nor the Government of Ontario keeps a list of the religious congregations in Toronto (Canada 22 Sept. 2004; Ontario 22 Sept. 2004).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Professor of Slavic Studies, University of Ottawa. Attempts to contact sources from the Russian Orthodox Church in Toronto were unsuccessful.

Internet sites, including: Government of Canada, Government of Ontario, Heritage Canada, Justice Canada, Social Development Canada.

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